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ABSTRACT

The function and history of the School Development Seminar (SDS) are described in this bulletin. The SDS was composed of school faculty and administrators, instructors from a local college, school district administrators, and parents. The participants used the SDS to share information and opinions on a variety of issues including inservice planning, coping with classroom disruption, and curriculum development. The advantages of this type of seminar for school improvement, communication, and unity are discussed. (JD)

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THE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT SEMINAR - A MODEL FOR SCHOOL CLIMATE IMPROVEMENT?

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The School Development Seminar - A Model For School Climate Improvement?

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The School Development Seminar, a twice monthly meeting of the educational personnel of the Daniels Elementary School, Malden, MA., is a vital component of our Cycle XII Teacher Corps project. All of our courses, workshops, and consultations revolve around it. Having existed for one and a half years, it has gone through numerous phases and developed an important role for itself in the life of the school. The Daniels faculty are now considering if and how the Seminar should continue when the project leaves the school in June.

As I take part in these discussions, I see that each member of the Seminar has a different sense of its value, functions and history. This article is an initial attempt to capture my perspective on the Seminar. I will not dwell on the inservice courses and workshops, the preservice or community components that relate to the Seminar. A more comprehensive review of the Seminar's history would include them since their story parallels and reflects its growth.

The School Development Seminar (SDS) has served two basic functions over the past year and a half at the Daniels School:

1. School communication and unification. The educational personnel of the school have used the SDS to share information and opinions on a variety of issues (e.g., new cafeteria rules, on-site courses and workshops, parents' plans for a school library). Information shared has guided the inservice education program of the project and helped John Maccario, the Daniels Principal, adapt his administration to teacher needs.

2. Collaborative problem-solving for school improvement. As a total faculty and in sub-committees the Daniels administrators and teachers identified school problems. Then they planned, field-tested, monitored, and refined solutions to the problems. By working together, they have created new programs and changed existing policies and practices to improve the school climate.

The Seminar operates in the following manner. Agendas for each session are suggested by individual faculty members and approved by both the Principal and a representative body of the faculty, the Teacher Advisory Council.

Each session is coordinated by the Principal with agenda items chaired by different teachers. Sessions last from one to two hours, occasionally supplemented by evening meetings [Retreats] which give faculty time to reflect on the progress and process of the Seminar. The focus and format of the sessions vary depending on the issues to be confronted, but most meetings combine whole and small group discussions.

The total group in any session can number as many as 40 people: 32 Daniels School educators plus Wheelock College instructors, school district administrators, and Daniels parents.[1]

The primary participants in the SDS, though, are the Daniel faculty members. This included John Maccario, the Principal; a full-time teacher, Richard Rodwell, acting as Assistant Principal; sixteen regular classroom teachers (grades K-6), five Title I teachers, five Special Education teachers, two specialists (Art and Music), one Teacher Aide, and one Adjustment Counselor.

Before the School Development Seminars began these educators seldom had opportunities to meet together to discuss school issues. In the year and a half of its operation, though, the SDS has helped them become better acquainted with each others' points of view, developed in them a professional group identity, and permitted them to shape programs and practices to meet their needs and the needs of Daniels children.

Yet its first seven months of existence were not easy ones. From September to December 1977 Wheelock personnel dominated the sessions, explaining their roles to the Daniesl faculty, trying to define with them the direction of the

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1 This number represents those personnel who serve in the school on at least a half-time basis.

project's inservice education. The atmosphere of the meetings was strained. Some teachers resented the presence of the project as represented by Wheelock personnel. Others were unsure how to relate to the "outsiders". Communication was difficult.

The issue of control emerged during this period: who would determine the direction of the Daniels inservice education program? Wheelock personnel or Daniels faculty? As a first step toward resolving this issue we formed the Teacher Advisory Council (TAC). It would make final decisions on agendas for the SDS, and it would guide all aspects of the inservice program, polling teachers to decide which workshops and courses would be offered, which project policies were useful, and which needed refinement.

At this point the TAC decided the Seminar should focus on two issues of concern to Daniels faculty: development of a school-wide student code of behavior, and the instituting of a school crisis room (where disruptive students could be sent until they calmed down). Two sub-committees were formed around there topics, each group led by a teacher with Wheelock personnel acting as facilitators.

This strained beginning was followed from January to March 1978 with little accomplishment. Storms cancelled three Seminar sessions. By March the sub-committees had made little progress, and the Daniels faculty were upset with each other and with the Teacher Corps project. The teachers, normally a cohesive body, were arguing with each other over aspects of the code of behavior and crisis room. Some felt Teacher Corps was more trouble than it was worth - causing trouble and accomplishing nothing. The frustions surfaced in a mid-March SDS and led to the convening of an evening Retreat.

The Retreat was a turning point for the Seminar and the project. As this meeting teachers voiced their complaints openly to project personnel for the first time. An atmosphere for open give and take was established. More importantly, the issue of control, raised in December, was resolved. A partnership for school development was solidified with Daniels School determining the focus of inservice efforts and Wheelock College providing the resources needed to facilitate the work. Throughout this troubled period, school district administrators and officers of the Malden Education Association were invaluable in promoting project communication and understanding.

Following the Retreat, the Seminar moved heavily into collaborative problem-solving. Two additional sub-committees were formed around teacher concerns: Class Enrollment Analysis, and Student Pride Development. Each had a teacher chairperson and a Wheelock facilitator.

By June the Code sub-committee had worked with parents and developed the first draft of the Code of Behavior which was subsequently implemented in September, 1978.

The Crisis Room committee organized the Daniels faculty to collect data for a full week on the nature and frequency of disruptive student behavior. It analyzed the data, shared it with district administrators, and together they concluded a crisis room was not needed. The real problem, they decided, was for programs to be found which met the needs of six particularly disruptive students. By September those students were in such programs.

The Class Enrollment committee organized the faculty to analyze the various special needs their students presented in the classroom (e.g., learning disabilities, emotional or medical problems). It took this data to district administrators, requesting lower enrollments in classes with a high number of special needs

students. The committee was pleased when the class assignments announced for September reflected their recommendations.

The Student Pride committee generated a number of ideas for increasing students' self-esteem and organized a successful June Field Day for teachers and students.

The school year ended on a high note. A project atmosphere of trust and open communication had developed. The SDS had evolved from a September forum for presentations by "Wheelock people" to a June setting for collaborative problem-solving.

The summer saw continued inservice activity (courses, conferences, and individual classroom development), but the Seminar did not convene again until September.

With the two most pressing teacher concerns (the Code of Behavior and Crisis Room) resolved, the faculty sought new issues to tackle in its September sessions. It formed a committee for curriculum development and several committees to create programs for enhancing student pride and self-esteem. They worked energetically and shared their ideas in a mid-October session only to realize that each proposal to develop student self-esteem demanded extra time and energy from them for its success. They already felt professionally over-extended and saw no way they could institute new programs and still maintain the quality of their classroom teaching.

They began to reassess their priorities and question how SDS time could best be spent. The consensus was to focus committee work on curriculum development.

The next three Seminar sessions did not move into committee work, though. They were devoted to previously scheduled workshops and presentations on topics of interest to the faculty: child abuse laws; the use of various instructional

supplies and equipment in the Teacher Resource Room.

December and January sessions have tried to define curriculum development topics for committee work. In the process the discussions have raised questions about the role and future of the Seminars at the Daniels School. The faculty seems most ready to tackle administrative aspects of the school curriculum: the scheduling of subjects, the development and maintenance of the Teacher Resource Room. Some are interested in limited curriculum change (e.g., two or three teachers at a grade level revising their science program). Others want some SDS sessions devoted to teachers sharing successful curriculum and instructional ideas.

The teachers are reluctant to form committees for extensive curriculum development - changes affecting more than one grade level. They question how necessary such changes are and wonder whether the work put into the development would pay off.

Within the next few weeks the TAC will decide the focus and organization of the remaining Seminars, and it will consider if and how the SDS should continue after June 1979.

The major issue they will confront is how the roles project personnel have played in the Seminars can be taken up by Daniels faculty and others after June. At many points in the SDS history Wheelock personnel have acted as catalysts - identifying issues and energizing faculty to work on them. They have facilitated problem-solving by providing new ideas, reinforcing teacher insights, and supplying needed information at vital times.

For the past year and a half the project has also provided the Seminar with support services (secretarial, administrative, and clerical) to help in the planning, preparation, and evaluation of each session. Will the Daniels

faculty have the time and energy to perform these tasks and carry out these roles?

In this period of reassessment we are learning a great deal about school development and school culture. This phase is forcing us to reflect about what works in a particular school at a specific point in its history.

After the project leaves, a variant of the Seminar suited to the culture of the Daniels might persist - one that continues to promote school communication, unification, and improvement.